

Women leaders lost in translation? A Study in Romans 16:1–16

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Marieke Sybrandi 

University of Oxford, UK

Abstract

This paper sets out a study in the text, interpretation, translation, and reception history of key terms and phrases relating to the ministry of particular women in Romans 16:1–16. It aims to show the complexity of translation and interpretation and demonstrate the importance of careful reading of the Greek text. It argues that terms and phrases relating to the women have not always been given their wider sense, thereby diminishing or denying the (leadership) roles of women in the early church. The phrases investigated are: διάκονος (v1) and προστάτις πολλῶν (v. 2) relating to Phoebe; συνεργούς (v. 3) and κοπιάω (vv. 6, 12) relating to Prisca, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis; Ἰουλιανῶν (v. 7) and ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις (v. 7) relating to Junia.

Keywords

Paul, Phoebe, Prisca, Junia, gender, Romans 16, women, leadership, apostles, translation, reception history.

Introduction

Romans 16 with its long list of greetings is easily overlooked by theologians. Compared to fifteen chapters of theological magnitude with its centrality in Christian theology, the final chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans fades in significance. However, scholarly interest in the social makeup of the Roman church(es) has re-established the importance of Romans 16. Since it contains the longest list of greetings in Paul's letters, it holds valuable information about the Christian scene in the empire's capital. Paul wants 26 individuals to be greeted, including 2 families and 3 house churches. Among them are names of both Gentile and Jewish origin, and names that were typical for slaves. This information implies a diverse group of Christians, in terms of their socioeconomic,

ethnic and religious background. Some scholars argue that Romans 16 was a separate letter that was addressed to the church in Ephesus. The reason is that some people mentioned in Romans 16 (Prisca, Aquila, Epaphroditus) were associated with the Ephesian church, not the church(es) in Rome.^{1,2} How did Paul know so many people in Rome when he had never been there? Goodspeed argued that Romans 16 was Paul's

¹ Edgar J. Goodspeed, 'Phoebe's Letter of Introduction', *The Harvard Theological Review* 44 (1951) 1, 55.

² Partly based on manuscript evidence of \mathfrak{B}^{46} .

Corresponding author:

Marieke Sybrandi, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2JD, UK.
Email: mariekesybrandi@hotmail.com

letter of introduction for Phoebe who was traveling to Ephesus. She needed protection from the ‘bad and brutal [Roman] world’ on arrival in Ephesus, which explains why so many women are mentioned, according to Goodspeed.³ However, it makes sense that Paul met some of the people of Romans 16 in Ephesus, because many Jewish people left Rome after the expulsion from Rome by emperor Claudius in ca 49/53^{CE} (Acts 18:2). They returned to Rome after his death in 54^{CE}. Further, Head explains that the repeated ἀσπάσασθε (*plural imperative*) suggests that the people Paul sends greetings to in Romans 16 are to greet *each other* as well, implying they are *all* addressees of the letter.⁴ Thus, Goodspeed’s argument for Romans 16 as a separate letter to Ephesus has been substantially undermined. I hold that Romans 16 forms a unity with Romans 1–15, and that the letter is addressed to the Christian community in Rome, telling us about some of the leaders of that community.

The verses featuring women, not least v. 7 about Ἰουλιαν, have particularly become subject to scholarly debate. Why? This paper will conduct a study in the text, interpretation, translation, and reception history of key terms and phrases relating to the ministry of particular women in Romans 16:1–16. Scholarly interpretations are often leading in English translations of Romans 16. This paper will show what is at stake in some of these debates. Based on the Greek text, scholarly interpretations and English translations, this paper will argue that key terms and phrases have not always been given their wider sense. The consequence is that women’s roles in the early church are diminished, or ministries disappeared altogether. The paper will conclude that careful attention to the Greek reveals an early church where women *did* have ministries, some of them apostolic. In three sections this paper focuses on three key phrases of Romans 16: διάκονος (v. 1) and

προστάτις πολλῶν (v. 2) relating to Phoebe; συνεργούς (v. 3) and κοπιᾶω (vv. 6, 12) relating to Prisca, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis; Ἰουλιαν (v. 7) and ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις (v. 7) relating to Junia.

Phoebe

Συνίστημι δὲ ὑμῖν Φοίβην τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν, οὐσαν [καὶ] διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς, ἵνα αὐτὴν προσδέξησθε ἐν κυρίῳ ἀξίως τῶν ἁγίων, καὶ παραστήτε αὐτῇ ἐν ᾧ ἂν ὑμῶν χρῆζῃ πράγματι, καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴ προστάτις πολλῶν ἐγενήθη καὶ ἐμοῦ αὐτοῦ.

Phoebe was probably the carrier of Paul’s letter to the Romans, and Paul commends her to the recipients of the letter (16:1–2: ‘I commend to you our sister Phoebe. . .’). He describes Phoebe, who was probably a Gentile Christian,⁵ as διάκονος of the church in Cencreae, and προστάτις πολλῶν. The words διάκονος and προστάτις are much debated. This section will look at the text, interpretation, translation and reception history of these two attributes of Phoebe. I will argue that certain interpretations and translations downplay Phoebe’s ministry and status in the early church and society.

Διάκονος

Διάκονος can be translated as servant, agent, attendant, or messenger, but also means ‘a minister of the church, especially a deacon.’ Διακονέω means to wait on, to serve.⁶ Although some ambiguity remains, Paul’s twenty other uses of διάκονος are helpful when interpreting Romans 16:1. In Romans 13:4 Paul refers to the governing authorities as God’s διάκονος, but from context it is evident they are concurrently leaders (‘θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν [ἡ ἐξουσία] σοὶ εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν’). Likewise, in Philippians

³ Goodspeed, ‘Phoebe’s Letter of Introduction’, 56.

⁴ Peter M. Head, ‘The Greetings of Romans 16 and the Audience of Romans’, NTS 70.2 (2024): 275–281, 8.

⁵ Suan Mathew, *Women in the Greetings of Romans 16:1–16: A Study of Mutuality and Women’s Ministry in the Letter to the Romans* (2013), 66.

⁶ Liddell and Scott: Greek-English Lexicon (2002). The Cambridge Greek Lexicon: Volume I: A–I (2021).

1:1 Paul uses διάκονοις to refer to (co)leaders of the Philippian church (‘τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Φιλίπποις σὺν ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνοις’). 1 Timothy 3:8 contains a description of some prototype of the office of deacon in a specific church (‘Διακόνους ὡσαύτως σεμνούς. . .’). Leadership might not be *inherent* to διάκονος, but context gives διάκονος that meaning in several passages. The reason Paul favoured διάκονος to describe Christian leaders in the early church, who had authority and responsibility, might be that Jesus modelled servant leadership to his disciples.

Dunn interprets διάκονος paired with οὖσαν to mean that Phoebe exercised an ongoing diaconal ministry.⁷ I agree with this view, because οὖσαν as present participle suggests ongoing activity. The mention of the ἐκκλησία in Cenchreae further hints at a more formal ministry. Paul customarily uses ἐκκλησία to refer to local churches, rarely to refer the Church. Thus, διάκονος of a particular church could, rather than a general minister of the gospel, signify someone serving in a more official capacity in a specific church, like Epaphras in Colossians 1:7 (‘καθὼς ἐμάθετε ἀπὸ Ἐπαφρᾶ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ συνδούλου ἡμῶν, ὃς ἐστὶν πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ’).⁸ Still, we do not know as much about a διάκονος’s activities as we would like, although preaching and teaching was probably included in that ministry.

The likelihood that Phoebe was a letter carrier further reinforces the probability of her role as minister in the church. She would be the one to explain the letter and expound its theology. Paul would only entrust the weighty letter to someone who was responsible and theologically apt.

English translations have translated διάκονος as: ‘servant’ (NET, in footnote: Phoebe was not a deaconess), ‘servant’ (ESV), ‘leader’ (CEV), ‘deacon’ (NIV, in footnote: *deacon* refers here to a Christian designated to serve with the

overseers/elders of the church), ‘deaconess (servant)’ (Amplified Bible), ‘deacon’ (NRSV, in footnote: or minister), ‘a key representative’ (The Message), ‘servant’ (KJV), ‘a dear Christian woman’ (Living Bible).

A few things can be said about the strengths and weaknesses of these translations. First of all, ‘deaconess’, is not faithful to the Greek, which does not use the grammatical feminine of διάκονος. It is further anachronistic since the word ‘deaconess’ only occurred in the third century. The Living Bible and The Message do not even attempt to recognise that Phoebe played a role in the ministry of the church of Cenchreae. Comparing how NET and ESV translate διάκονος elsewhere in the New Testament proves insightful: both NET and ESV translate διάκονος as ‘servant’ in Romans 13:4, as ‘minister’ in Colossians 1:7, and as ‘deacon’ in 1 Timothy 3:8. Phoebe’s situation seems closest to Epaphras from Colossae (Colossians 1:7), so why is Epaphras described as minister and Phoebe as servant? Since context determines meaning, is it possible there is a bias, at least in ESV, to use ‘minister’ for men (Epaphras, Paul and his coworkers) and ‘servant’ for women? Biased or not, the result of this translation of διάκονος is that Phoebe’s ministry vanishes from the Bible. Whatever her ministry as διάκονος in Cenchreae looked like, according to some interpretations she did not have a ministry at all.

I thus believe that ‘minister’ is the best translation for διάκονος in 16:1, because it includes both senses of servant and leadership, which seem clear from the context. I further accept that Phoebe had a permanent leadership role in the Cenchreae church. Phoebe’s ministry has not always been acknowledged, which is a consequence of the ambiguity of διάκονος, but also of bias against female leaders in the early church.

Προστάτις πολλῶν

The second word Paul uses to describe Phoebe is προστάτις. This word is a hapax legomenon

⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (1988), 886.

⁸ Mathew, *Women in the Greetings of Romans 16:1–16*, 71, 73.

in the New Testament, and interpretation of singularities is difficult because information is scant. Προστάτις is grammatically feminine and means patroness, protectress, leader, director, defender, champion, someone who stands at the head of others, guardian.⁹ The verb προστάτέω means to stand before or at the head of, be ruler over, be in charge, have control, be president or leader, protect, guard.¹⁰ It thus carries the sense of helping or benefacting someone in a lower position, or protecting a group against something.

Some scholars are reluctant to accept the idea Phoebe could have been a leader, 'since it is difficult to conceive how Phoebe would have had the opportunity to be a "leader" of Paul.'¹¹ They even dismiss the legitimacy of this view by framing it as 'feminist'.¹² This seems to me a bias against female leaders in the early church, for when Paul visited churches in other cities, surely he worked *with* the local leadership of that church, whoever that was. Still, προστάτις is complicated to translate because we cannot know its meaning with certainty. Some people believe προστάτις means patron(ess) in the financial sense. Phoebe would have been a wealthy woman who used her wealth to support the Cenchræan church and Paul's mission trips.¹³ MacGillivray distinguishes between Roman patronage, a hierarchical and even exploitative relationship between a patron and an individual, indebted client, and Greek euergetism. Euergetic benefactors helped and

supplied communities, or even whole cities.¹⁴ A euergetic meaning of προστάτις would fit the context of v. 2 where Phoebe is said to have been προστάτις πολλῶν, including Paul. Perhaps Phoebe sponsored a house church, an idea that fits the sense of προστάτις as euergetically benefacting people and also some kind of leadership.

English Bible translations diverge in how they translate προστάτις: 'a great help' (NET), 'a patron' (ESV), 'a respected leader' (CEV), 'benefactor' (NIV), 'benefactor' (NRSV), 'a helper' (Amplified Bible), 'she's helped many a person' (the Message), 'she has helped many' (Living Bible), 'a succourer' (KJV).

A few things can be said about the strengths and weaknesses of these translations. I would argue that 'helper', and especially 'has helped many', fails to convey the prestige Paul attributes to Phoebe. It minimises her role in the church and society. Therefore, 'benefactor' in the euergetic sense may be the best translation of προστάτις as it conveys Phoebe's honoured position in Cenchræa. It also translates the noun as noun instead of verb.

And what to make of γὰρ? Perhaps the logic of v. 2 lies there. Was the help Phoebe might need in Rome of the same kind as what she gave herself to Paul and others? We do not know, but not necessarily. Paul says: welcome her and help her with whatever she needs γὰρ she has been a benefactor of many. If Phoebe did not know Rome, she would need connections and perhaps hospitality.

To conclude, προστάτις is difficult to translate into English. However, there is a tendency of some interpreters and translators to assign Phoebe a more subordinate role with προστάτις. This seems inappropriate, because προστάτις implies status of some kind. To fail to express that is to minimise Phoebe's role. The result is that Phoebe's status as benefactor

⁹ Greekbible.com. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (2002). The Cambridge Greek Lexicon: Volume I: A-I (2021).

¹⁰ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (2002). The Cambridge Greek Lexicon: Volume I: A-I (2021).

¹¹ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1996), 916. Also Schreiner and Blomberg in James Beck (ed.), *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (2005), 148, 285.

¹² Blomberg in Beck, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 148.

¹³ John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's good news for the world* (1994), 393.

¹⁴ E.D. MacGillivray, 'Romans 16:2, προστάτις/προστάτης, and the Application of Reciprocal Relationships to New Testament Texts', *Novum Testamentum*, 53 (2011), 187–188.

in (the church in) Cenchreae has often been overlooked.

Summary. Combining διάκονος and προστάτις πολλῶν, I conclude that Phoebe was a prominent member of Cenchreaen society and leader in the Cenchreaen church. She served in some recognised leadership role in the local church, and with her wealth benefacted many people, although we know not how. This fuller sense of Phoebe's roles is not always reflected in English translations, which is a shame, because it further contributes to the idea that there were no female leaders in the early church.

Prisca, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis

Ἀσπάσασθε Πρίσκαν καὶ Ἀκύλαν τοὺς συνεργούς μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

ἀσπάσασθε Μαρίαν, ἣτις πολλὰ ἐκοπίασεν εἰς ὑμᾶς.

ἀσπάσασθε Τρύφαιναν καὶ Τρυφῶσαν τὰς κοπιώσας ἐν κυρίῳ. ἀσπάσασθε Περσίδα τὴν ἀγαπητήν, ἣτις πολλὰ ἐκοπίασεν ἐν κυρίῳ.

This second section focuses on five other women, whom Paul describes as συνεργούς (Prisca, with her husband Aquila, v. 3), ἐκοπίασεν (Mary, Persis, v. 6,12) and κοπιώσας (Tryphena, Tryphosa, v. 12). These words are not as controversial as διάκονον and προστάτις about Phoebe in vv. 1–2, but are worth considering, since they concern women's ministry in the early church. We will look again at the text, interpretation, translation and reception history of how these five women are described. I aim to show that their ministries are often overlooked and unacknowledged.

Prisca: συνεργός

Συνεργός is the first word Paul uses to describe Prisca and Aquila. It means co-worker, partner, or associate or partner in a work, fellow

labourer,¹⁵ which Paul pairs with ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, suggesting he is referring to partners in his apostolic mission, not his tentmaking business. Paul uses *συνεργός* elsewhere consistently to refer to apostolic work, sometimes by context (Philippians 2:25: Ἐπαφρόδιτον τὸν ἀδελφὸν καὶ συνεργὸν καὶ συστρατιώτην μου, ὑμῶν δὲ ἀπόστολον καὶ λειτουργὸν τῆς χρείας μου, πέμψαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς. . .'), or explicitly by adding (τοῦ) θεοῦ (e.g. 1 Corinthians 3:9: 'θεοῦ γὰρ ἔσμεν *συνεργοί*'). Others Paul calls partners in his apostolic work are: Aquila, Urbanus and Timothy (Romans 16:3, 9, 21), Apollos (1 Corinthians 3:9), Titus (2 Corinthians 8:23), Erastus (Philippians 2:25), Euodia and Syntyche and Clement (Philippians 4:2, 3), and Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke (Philemon 24). From this long list of people that Paul calls συνεργός, a picture emerges about the responsibilities a συνεργός of Paul might have had in the early church. It is thus significant Paul calls Prisca (along with Aquila) coworker, or partner in the gospel.

According to Acts 18, Prisca was a teacher of the gospel, even teaching Apollos, who subsequently became a successful missionary. Opponents of female leaders subtly have at times twisted the Greek to support their view. Blomberg for example writes: 'a Christian woman *helping to teach* an adult Christian man in the area of religious doctrine.'¹⁶ This is doing the text an injustice. The Greek treats Priscilla and Aquila as a grammatical pair, using the plural verbs ἀκούσαντες, προσελάβοντο and ἐξέθεντο' (Acts 18:26). What applies to one, applies to them both. To say that Priscilla *helped* Aquila is eisegesis. The other way around would be more likely, since Priscilla is mentioned first! Prisca is always mentioned with her husband Aquila, but four out of six times her name

¹⁵ Greekbible.com. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (2002). The Cambridge Greek Lexicon: Volume II, K-Ω (2021).

¹⁶ Blomberg in Beck, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 147.

comes before his. This is unusual and people have pondered its significance. Was Prisca of higher social status than Aquila? Was she the main teacher of the pair? Better known for her Christian work? There is not enough evidence to answer these questions.

English Bible translations have translated *συνεργούς* as: ‘fellow workers’ (NET, ESV, NIV, Amplified, Living Bible Translation), ‘served together’ (CEV), ‘who work with me’ (NRSV), ‘who have worked hand in hand with me in serving Jesus’ (the Message), ‘helpers’ (KJV).

A few things can be said about the strengths and weaknesses of these translations. The Message is inconsistent in translating *συνεργός* in Romans 16 where it appears 3 times (vv. 3 and 9 ‘companion’, 21 ‘partner’). *Συνεργός* is not easily translated into English with a word that people associate with church leadership. Opponents of women in leadership take any ambiguity in the text to support their view. Yet, when reading Paul’s letters, a picture emerges of someone who works (alongside Paul) in a local church in preaching, teaching and leading. However, in translations of Romans 16 that picture does not always come through. The result is that Prisca’s ministry leaves the page and her prominence is downplayed. The impact of the disappearing of this woman’s ministry further strengthens the idea that there were no female leaders in the early church.

Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis: κοπιᾶω

The next word Paul uses to describe the ministry of women is *ἐκοπίασεν* (vv. 6, 12) and *κοπιῶσας* (v. 12), adding *ἐν κυρίῳ* in v. 12. *Κοπιᾶω* is very common in the New Testament and has a clear meaning: to work hard, to work till one is weary, to become tired.¹⁷ *Κοπιᾶω* is only used for women in Romans 16.

¹⁷ Liddel and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (2002). The Cambridge Greek Lexicon: Volume II, Κ-Ω (2021).

Moo asserts that *κοπιᾶω* is not a technical term for ministry.¹⁸ However, whatever Moo means by ‘technical term’, Paul uses *κοπιᾶω* consistently to refer to apostolic labour, which includes leadership.¹⁹ For example, 1 Corinthians 16:15–16 shows that the ones who *κοπιῶντι* are also the leaders of the church (‘ὁμοίως ὑποτάσθητε τοῖς τοιοῦτοις καὶ παντὶ τῷ συνεργῶντι καὶ κοπιῶντι,’ referring to those who have devoted themselves to the service of the saints). Also the contexts of 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, 1 Corinthians 15:10 and Galatians 4:11²⁰ make it clear that Paul speaks about apostolic work with *κοπιᾶω*. Of course the association of *κοπιᾶω* with leadership does not make the verb itself mean leadership, as Schreiner has pointed out: ‘women labor in ministry, without necessarily functioning as leaders.’²¹ Still, the association of *κοπιᾶω* with leadership in Pauline texts is strong. Therefore, Paul’s use of *κοπιᾶω* elsewhere makes it feasible that the women of Romans 16:6, 12—Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis—were also leaders of some kind in the early church.

English translations have translated *ἐκοπίασεν* and participle *κοπιῶσας* as: ‘worked very hard’, ‘labourers’ (NET), ‘worked hard’ (ESV), ‘work (so) hard’ (CEV), ‘worked very hard’ (NIV), ‘worked very hard’, ‘workers’ (NRSV), ‘worked so hard’ (Amplified), ‘what a worker she has turned out to be’, ‘diligent women’, ‘hard worker’ (the Message), ‘worked so hard’ (Living Bible), ‘labour’, ‘bestowed much labour’ (KJV).

¹⁸ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 921.

¹⁹ Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (2016), 244.

²⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13: Ἐρωτῶμεν δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, εἰδέναι τοὺς κοπιῶντας ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ προϊσταμένους ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ καὶ νοουθετοῦντας ὑμᾶς, καὶ ἡγεῖσθαι αὐτοὺς ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ διὰ τὸ ἔργον αὐτῶν. εἰρηνεύετε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς. 1 Corinthians 15:10: χάριτι δὲ θεοῦ εἰμι ὃ εἰμι, καὶ ἡ χάρις αὐτοῦ ἡ εἰς ἐμὲ οὐ κενὴ ἐγενήθη, ἀλλὰ περισσότερον αὐτῶν πάντων ἐκοπίασα, οὐκ ἐγὼ δὲ ἀλλὰ ἡ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ [ἡ] σὺν ἐμοί. Galatians 4:11: φοβοῦμαι ὑμᾶς μή πως εἰκῆ κεκοπίακα εἰς ὑμᾶς.

²¹ Schreiner in Beck, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 281.

Thus, this survey shows that English translations do not express ἐκοπίασεν and κοπιώσας as connoting leadership roles in the church. This is understandable because κοπιᾶω simply means to work hard. The context of Romans 16 does not give κοπιᾶω the same clear association with apostolic ministry we find elsewhere. Hence, the connection of these women with apostolic ministry is less explicit, and their leadership largely invisible to an unobservant reader, despite Paul praising them for their (apostolic) work. This case study shows the complexities of translation, but also reinforces the accumulative invisibility of female leaders in the early church.

Junia

Ἀσπάσασθε Ἀνδρόνικον καὶ Ἰουνίαν τοὺς συγγενεῖς μου καὶ συναιχμαλώτους μου, οἵτινές εἰσιν

ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις, οἳ καὶ πρὸ ἐμοῦ γέγοναν ἐν Χριστῷ.

A female leader in the early church with more visibility is Junia (v. 7), although few names are surrounded by as much controversy as hers, which is also a hapax legomenon. This section will look at the text, interpretation, translation and reception history surrounding the two controversies around v7: Junia's name and gender (Ἰουνίαν) and her apostolic status (ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις). In addressing these two controversies I will attempt to show that although the Greek alone is not perfectly clear, the context *is* clear. However, it seems that bias against women leaders in the early church were the cause for Junia's gender change and 'doubtful' apostolic status. The consequence is that this woman's apostolic ministry vanished into thin air, an injustice which must be remedied by interpreters and Bible translators alike.

Ἰουνίαν

Ἰουνία forms a grammatical pair with Andronicus: everything applies to both of them. The text is clear: Ἰουνίαν appears in the accusative. The likely nominative is Ἰουνία, Junia,

a female name. The only textual variant is Ἰουλιαν,²² which comes from another female name: Julia.²³ However, in the twentieth century, Nestle-Aland editions 13–27 (1927–1998) a circumflex appeared on the name: Ἰουνιᾶν, making it the accusative not of Ἰουνία, but of Ἰουνιάς, the supposedly male name 'Junias'. Technically this is possible, since without accenting there is no way to know the nominative. Plus, accents only started to appear in papyri and majuscules in the seventh century.²⁴

In the early church, it was almost universally accepted that Ἰουνίαν referred to a woman. The only person to identify Ἰουνίαν as a man was Epiphanius (c. 315–403), who also identified Prisca (v. 3) as a man, which I think compromises his reliability as a source on names and genders. Ἰουνίαν's gender was undisputed until Aegidius of Rome (1247–1316), from whence a male interpretation was favoured.²⁵

In a study on the name, Cervin showed that Iunia is a Latin name and that when the rules of transcription are applied, there is no ambiguity on where the accent should be placed, and thus no ambiguity of the gender of Ἰουνίαν.²⁶ The shift to the male 'Junias' as normative for English translations is a result of accenting in modern Nestle-Aland editions. A theory was launched that Junias was short for Junianus. However, Belleville has shown that in Greek nicknames typically became abbreviations, like Prisca-Priscilla, whereas Latin nicknames were typically longer.²⁷ This makes 'Junianus' implausible.

²² See Nestle-Aland Edition 26 (1979).

²³ Linda Belleville, 'Ἰουνίαν . . . ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις: A Re-examination of Romans 16.7 in Light of Primary Source Materials', *New Testament Studies* 51 (2005) 2, 237–238.

²⁴ Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (2005), 29.

²⁵ Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (2009), 65.

²⁶ Richard S. Cervin, 'A Note regarding the Name 'Junia(s)' in Romans 16.7,' *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994), 468–470.

²⁷ Belleville, 'Ἰουνίαν . . . ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις', 239.

English translations reflect the debate:

<i>Bible translation</i>	<i>Translation of Ἰουνία</i>	<i>Footnote?</i>
NET	Junia	Or “Junias”
ESV	Junia	Or <i>Junias</i>
CEV 1995	Junias	
CEV current	Junia	
NIV 1973	Junias	
NIV 2011	Junia	
NRSV	Junia	Or <i>Junias</i> ; other ancient sources read <i>Julia</i>
Amplified 1958	Junias	There is a higher probability that the name is feminine; no masculine forms found in this or near time periods
The Message 1993	Junias	
Living Bible 1971	Junias	
KJV 1611	Junia	

This overview shows that translations pre-1998 (except KJV) followed Nestle-Aland in Ἰουνία-Junias, but have now virtually all got ‘Junia’. Some translations retain a footnote which mentions Junias, even though Nestle-Aland 28 itself does not mention Ἰουνία anymore! This shows that, though its credibility has evaporated, the male version lingers.

Interpreters used to be divided on Ἰουνία’s gender. Sanday and Headlam admit that Junias is ‘less usual as a man’s name’,²⁸ ‘Less usual’ is an understatement, since the name Junias is not attested in ancient sources and is thus a non-existent name, whereas Junia appears on many inscriptions.²⁹ Piper and Grudem hold that ‘the Church Fathers were evidently divided’

²⁸ William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 5th ed. (1902), 422.

²⁹ Ben Witherington and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (2004), 378.

on Junia/s,³⁰ which is a misleading statement, since it is Epiphanius against everyone else. Burer and Wallace assert that there is ‘quite a bit of evidence enlisted on both sides.’³¹ Again, there is no good evidence at all to suggest that Ἰουνία was a man; everyone until the thirteenth century, bar Epiphanius who was an unreliable witness on names and genders, believed Ἰουνία was Junia. These particular scholars all believe Paul does not support women leadership in the church, and that there cannot have been women leaders in the early church. I believe it is this view that is leading their interpretation of Romans 16, not the text itself.

Scholarly verdict on these interpreters is severe. Brooten summarises: ‘Because a woman could not have been an apostle, the woman who is here called apostle could not have been a woman.’³² Epp agrees that the shift to Junias happened because Ἰουνία was noteworthy among the apostles, and that some scholars make the argument from *their* context, not the passage.³³ I find it incomprehensible that scholars even dared doubt Junia’s gender, since no one disputed it for twelve centuries. It is hard to believe that it is *not* their presumptions about the nonexistence of female church leaders that have blinded scholars to the plain logic right in front of them: that there was a female apostle called Junia, as confirmed by the early church. The consequence of nearly 100 years of futile discussion about Junia’s gender has drawn attention away from the fact that there *was* a woman apostle in Romans 16. Junia’s gender, ministry and existence disappeared from the Bible which perpetuated the idea in people’s

³⁰ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (1991), 80.

³¹ Michael H. Burer and Daniel B. Wallace, ‘Was Junia Really an Apostle? A Re-examination of Rom 16.7’, *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001), 76.

³² Bernadette J. Brooten, ‘“Junia . . . Outstanding among the Apostles” (Romans 16:7),’ in L.S. and A. Swidler (eds.), *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration* (1997), 142.

³³ Epp, *Junia*, 26, 57–59.

minds that there were no female leaders in the early church, which, as shown, is inaccurate.

Ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις

The second controversy around Ἰουνία focuses on what Paul says about her and Andronicus; that they are fellow Jews, fellow prisoners, ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις, and were ‘in Christ’ before Paul was. At first glance, ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις means having been marked, being distinguished, famous, remarkable³⁴ among the apostles. This means there was a female apostle in the early church: Junia. Patristic fathers accepted this for a fact. Belleville helpfully lists nineteen Greek and Latin fathers who acknowledge Junia’s apostleship.³⁵ Chrysostom writes: ‘to be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles. . . Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.’³⁶ It seems that some modern interpreters paid little attention to the historical translation of this phrase, especially by Patristic writers. Some interpreters attempt to challenge Junia’s apostleship in two ways: first by arguing that ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις should be translated in an exclusive sense, meaning that the subject (Andronicus and Junia) is not included in the group of apostles. Secondly by tampering with the definition of apostle. We will look at these attempts in turn.

Some scholars do not hide their assumptions about female leaders in the early church. Sanday and Headlam write: ‘If, as is probable, Andronicus and Junias are included among the Apostles. . . then it is more probable that the name is masculine, although Chrysostom does not appear to consider the idea of a female apostle impossible.’³⁷ Stott in his commentary

chose ‘Junias’ and ‘among the apostles’,³⁸ which seems to be a favoured combination that excludes Junia from apostleship. Burer and Wallace actively tried to challenge Junia’s apostleship.³⁹ They claim that ἐν + dative plural should be translated exclusively, not inclusively. I believe they are clutching straws when they write: ‘even if ἐν with the dative plural is used in the sense of ‘among’ this does not necessarily locate Andronicus and Junia *within* the band of apostles; rather, it is equally possible, *ex hypothesi*, that *knowledge of them* existed among the apostles’.⁴⁰ They do not want to accept that there was a female apostle because that could overturn their view of women leadership in church. So they argue that ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις means ‘well known to a group they are not part of.’⁴¹ However, Belleville responded arguing that ἐν + dative plural *is* inclusive, citing a similar construction in Matthew 2:6: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.’⁴² (‘οὐδαμῶς ἐλαχίστη εἶ ἐν τοῖς ἡγεμόσιν Ἰουδα’) Heim further cites examples of ἐν + plural dative where subject/group are of the same substance. Persuasively she demonstrates that ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις indicates ‘the subject’s place of prominence in relation to the group.’⁴³ Junia and Andronicus were thus *prominent* apostles.

English translations have translated ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις as follows: ‘well known to the apostles’ (footnote: Or ‘among the apostles’, citing Burer and Wallace’s argument, NET), ‘well known to the apostles’ (ESV), ‘highly respected by the apostles’ (CEV), ‘outstanding among the apostles’ (footnote: Or *are esteemed by*, NIV), ‘prominent among the apostles’

³⁸ Stott, *The Message of the Romans*, 393.

³⁹ Burer & Wallace, ‘Was Junia Really an Apostle?’, 78.

⁴⁰ Burer & Wallace, ‘Was Junia Really an Apostle?’, 85.

⁴¹ Burer & Wallace, ‘Was Junia Really an Apostle?’, 88.

⁴² Belleville, ‘Ἰουνίαν . . . ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις’, 243.

⁴³ Erin Heim, ‘Women in the Pauline Epistles: Lessons from the Jesus Tradition’, *Minion* (2020), 317.

³⁴ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (2002).

³⁵ Belleville, ‘Ἰουνίαν . . . ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις’, 232.

³⁶ Chrysostom in Epp, *Junia*, 32.

³⁷ Sanday and Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 423.

(NRSV), ‘who are held in high esteem in *the estimation of the apostles*’ (footnote: The Greek and larger context favour this understanding; Andronicus and Junia are not identified as apostles here, Amplified), ‘outstanding leaders’ (the Message), ‘respected by the apostles’ (Living Bible), ‘of note among the apostles’ (KJV).

The translations reflect the scholarly debate, though some translations are slow to catch up. Now that it is generally accepted there is reference to a woman apostle, the debate has shifted to Paul’s definition of ‘apostle’. Does Paul understand apostle in the narrow sense, referring to the twelve disciples, plus himself? Or to the 72 that Jesus commissioned in Luke 10? Or even the 500 to whom he appeared after his Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:6)? Paul frequently uses ἀπόστολος, calling himself the last and least of the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:8–9 Ἐγὼ γὰρ εἰμι ὁ ἐλάχιστος τῶν ἀποστόλων). Since Andronicus and Junia became Christians before Paul, they could certainly have been apostles.⁴⁴ According to Epp, Paul only called people apostles who had encountered the risen Christ, who had been commissioned to proclaim the gospel, had suffered as a consequence of that, and had performed signs and wonders.⁴⁵ This fits with what 16:7 tells us. Stott still insists Junia and Andronicus were outstanding ‘missionaries’ but *not* apostles of Christ.⁴⁶ Schreiner even theorises that ‘if Junia was an apostle, she probably functioned as a missionary to women.’⁴⁷ This is clearly a modern projection onto the text. Why tamper with ‘apostle’ in this way? The implications of this view and its corresponding translation are far-reaching: interpreters and translators have first led people to believe this female apostle was actually a man, and then they tried to argue that she was

not actually an apostle. What sort of apostles Andronicus and Junia were is of course a relevant question, but the little information Paul gives certainly suggests that in his opinion they were apostles like he was.

The question becomes why interpreters in the twentieth century have struggled to accept Junia’s apostleship. When the evidence lands rather clearly, I think the reason must be bias against women leaders in the (early) church. Junia’s apostleship challenges the bias that women cannot be apostles and hold authority in the early church. Interpreters might struggle imagining it, but Romans 16 shows Paul clearly praising women and their apostolic ministry.

Summary

To summarise, before accents were placed, the early church believed Andronicus and Junia were prominent apostles. However, ‘morphology and grammar have been pushed to their limits to show the slightest possibility that Junia was not, in fact, an apostle, but only “esteemed by” them.’⁴⁸ Following a century of discussion about Junia’s gender, most scholars now agree again that Junia was a woman, which is reflected in English translations. However, for some scholars Ἰουνιαν has had to give up her apostolic status in exchange for her correct gender identity. I think that the fact that Junia was a woman has made it hard for people to accept her apostleship. The confusion is caused by the view that churches should not have women leaders. Interestingly, this view is based on verses from Paul himself, the same Paul who in Romans 16 clearly acknowledges women leaders and rejoices in their ministry.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper set out to consider the text, interpretation, translation, and reception history of key terms and phrases relating to

⁴⁴ As affirmed by Stanley J Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: a Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (1995), 93.

⁴⁵ Epp, *Junia*, 70.

⁴⁶ Stott, *The Message of the Romans*, 396.

⁴⁷ Schreiner in Beck, *Two Views of Women in Ministry*, 287.

⁴⁸ Yii-Jan Lin, ‘Junia: An Apostle before Paul’, *JBL* 139 (2020) 1, 208.

the ministry of particular women in Romans 16:1–16. It addressed six terms and phrases that receive much scholarly attention: διάκονος (v. 1), προστάτις (v. 2), συνεργούς (v. 3), ἐκοπίασεν (v. 6, 12), Ἰουνίαν (v. 7), ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις (v. 7). These phrases are important descriptions of these women's ministries, however, they are obscured in English translations. In Phoebe's case, the wider meaning of her ministry as διάκονος is concealed by inconsistent translations of διάκονος, and her status as προστάτις has often been rendered 'a great help'. Prisca, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis had ministries that were described in apostolic ways (συνεργός, κοπιάω), but this cannot be sufficiently drawn out in translations. The Patristics took Junia's apostleship for granted. Later Junia was believed to be a male apostle, but when her female gender identity was once again affirmed, her apostleship became disputed, though little evidence was given.

Recognising that one-to-one equivalents in Greek and English are not always possible, I believe that English translations should be consistent, allowing people to make the connections. Instead, English translations sometimes prove to be problematic in how they translate the terms Paul uses to describe these women and their ministries, leading people to believe inaccuracies.

Many people look to Paul to answer the question whether women can be leaders in the church, but strangely enough the evidence of Romans 16 is either ignored or dismissed by complementarians (in favour of passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:33–38 and 1 Timothy 2:8–15).⁴⁹ Stott openly wonders whether Romans 16 sheds light on the question of women's ministry but concludes that regardless of the women mentioned, 'none of them is called a presbyter in the church.'⁵⁰ Likewise, Blomberg writes that the women of Romans 16 did not hold any 'identifiable position', like formal pastor or

elder or overseer,⁵¹ which edges on the anachronistic. This paper has shown that Romans 16 answers the question of women in church leadership resoundingly affirmative. Women were leaders in the earliest church and Paul does not ignore it! Instead, he praises them. At least six women are mentioned who all had significant (leadership) ministries in the early church. Romans 16 is a goldmine for questions on women leadership but it is often overlooked. Translations sometimes blur the clarity of the Greek text and reduce a fuller meaning conveyed in words such as διάκονος and συνεργός. The ministries of Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis nearly vanished from Romans 16. Interpreters have bent over backwards trying to prove their point that Paul cannot possibly have endorsed, let alone encouraged, women leaders. I believe preconceived ideas about women leaders in the church is why the ministries of these women become invisible. The impact of these interpretations is significant, since, as shown, English Bible translations tend to follow scholarly debates. This paper has demonstrated that interpretations and translations have often minimised the roles and church ministries of the women from Romans 16, but also that, when careful attention is paid to the Greek text, it is clear that women *did* have active (leadership) roles in the early church.

ORCID iD

Marieke Sybrandi  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2234-7374>

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⁴⁹ Blomberg in Beck, *Two Views of Women in Ministry*, 153.

⁵⁰ Stott, *The Message of the Romans*, 397.

⁵¹ Blomberg in Beck, *Two Views of Women in Ministry*, 153, 180.

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